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DEATH:

A

POETICAL ESSAY.

BY BEILBY PORTEUS, M. A.
FELLOW OF CHRIST'S COLLEGE.

THE FIFTH EDITION.

L O N D O N,

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1483



A Clause of Mr. SEATON's Will,

Dated Oct. 8. 1738.

I Give my Kislisbury Estate to the University of Cambridge for ever: the Rents of which shall be disposed of yearly by the Vice-Chancellor for the time being, as he the Vice-Chancellor, the Master of Clare Hall, and the Greek Professor for the time being, or any two of them shall agree. Which three persons aforesaid shall give out a Subject, which Subject shall for the first Year be one or other of the Perfections or Attributes of the Supreme Being, and so the succeeding Years, till the Subject is exhausted; and afterwards the Subject shall be either Death, Judgment, Heaven, Hell, Purity of Heart, &c. or whatever else may be judged by the Vice-Chancellor, Master of Clare-Hall, and Greek Professor, to be most conducive to the Honour of the Supreme Being and Recommendation of Virtue. And they shall yearly dispose of the Rent of the above Estate to that Master of Arts, whose Poem on the Subject given shall be best approved by them. Which Poem I ordain to be always in English, and to be printed; the expence of which shall be deducted out of the product of the Estate, and the residue given as a reward for the Composer of the Poem, or Ode, or Copy of Verses.

WE the underwritten, do assign Mr. SEATON's Reward to BEILBY PORTEUS, M. A. for his Poem on DEATH, and direct the said Poem to be printed, according to the tenor of the Will.

Oct. 8. 1759.

L. Caryl Vice-Chancellor.

J. Wilcox Master of Clare Hall.

M. Lort Greek Professor.

DEATH:

A

POETICAL ESSAY.

FRRIEND to the wretch, whom every friend forfakes,
I woo thee, DEATH! In Fancy's fairy paths
Let the gay Songster rove, and gently trill
The strain of empty joy. Life and its joys
I leave to those that prize them. At this hour,
This solemn hour, when Silence rules the world,
And wearied Nature makes a gen'ral pause;
Wrapt in Night's sable robe, through cloysters drear
And charnels pale, tenanted by a throng
Of meagre phantoms shooting croses my path
With silent glance, I seek the shadowy vale
Of DEATH. Deep in a murky cave's recess

Lav'd

Lav'd by Oblivion's listless stream, and fenc'd
 By shelving rocks and intermingled horrors
 Of yew' and cypress' shade from all intrusion
 Of busy noontide beam, the MONARCH sits
 In unsubstantial Majesty enthron'd.
 At his right hand, nearest himself in place
 And frightfulness of form, his Parent SIN
 With fatal industry and cruel care
 Bufiles herself in pointing all his stings,
 And tipping every shaft with venom drawn
 From her infernal store : around him rang'd
 In terrible array and mixture strange
 Of uncouth shapes, stand his dread Ministers.
 Foremost Old Age, his natural ally
 And firmest friend : next him diseases thick,
 A motly ran ; Fever with cheek of fire ;
 Consumption wan ; Palsy, half warm with life,
 And half a clay-cold lump ; joint-tort'ring Gout,
 And ever-gnawing Rheum ; Convulsion wild ;
 Swol'n Dropsy ; panting Asthma ; Apoplex
 Full-gorg'd. There too the Pestilence that walks
 In darkness, and the Sicknefs that destroys

At broad noon-day. These and a thousand more,
 Horrid to tell, attentive wait ; and, when
 By Heaven's command DEATH waves his ebon wand,
 Sudden rush forth to execute his purpose,
 And scatter desolation o'er the Earth.

Ill-fated Man, for whom such various forms
 Of Mis'ry wait, and mark their future prey !
 Ah ! why, ALL-RIGHTEOUS FATHER, didst thou make
 This Creature Man ? why wake th' unconscious dust
 To life and wretchedness ? O better far
 Still had he slept in uncreated night,
 If this the Lot of Being. Was it for this
 Thy Breath divine kindled within his breast
 The vital flame ? For this was thy fair image
 Stamp'd on his soul in godlike lineaments ?
 For this dominion giv'n him absolute
 O'er all thy works, only that he might reign
 Supreme in woe ? From the blest source of Good
 Could Pain and Death proceed ? Could such foul Ills
 Fall from fair Mercy's hands ? Far be the thought,
 The impious thought ! God never made a Creature

But what was good. He made a *living Soul*:
The wretched Mortal was the work of MAN.
 Forth from his Maker's hands he sprung to life,
 Fresh with immortal bloom; No pain he knew,
 No fear of Change, no check to his desires
 Save one command. That one command (which stood
 'Twixt him and Death, the test of his obedience,)
 Urg'd on by wanton curiosity
 He broke. There in one moment was undone
 The fairest of God's works. The same rash hand
 That pluck'd in evil hour the fatal fruit
 Unbarr'd the gates of Hell, and let loose Sin
 And Death and all the family of Pain
 To prey upon Mankind. Young Nature saw
 The monstrous crew, and shook thro' all her frame.
 Then fled her new-born lustre, then began
 Heaven's chearful face to low'r, then vapours choak'd
 The troubled air, and form'd a veil of clouds
 To hide the willing Sun. The Earth convuls'd
 With painful throes threw forth a bristly crop
 Of thorns and briars; and Insect, Bird, and Beast,
 That wont before with admiration fond

To

To gaze at Man, and fearless croud around him,
 Now fled before his face, shunning in haste
 Th' infection of his misery. He alone,
 Who justly might, th' offended Lord of Man,
 Turn'd not away his face ; he full of pity
 Forsook not in this uttermost distress
 His best-lov'd work. That comfort still remain'd,
 (That best, that greatest comfort in affliction)
 The countenance of God, and thro' the gloom
 Shot forth some kindly gleams, to cheer and warm
 Th' offender's sinking soul. Hope sent from Heav'n
 Uprais'd his drooping head, and shew'd afar
 A happier scene of things ; the PROMIS'D SEED
 Trampling upon the SERPENT's humbled crest ;
 DEATH of his sting disarm'd, and the dank grave
 Made pervious to the realms of endless day,
 No more the limit but the gate of life.

Cheer'd with the view, MAN went to till the ground
 From whence he rose ; sentenc'd indeed to toil
 As to a punishment, yet (ev'n in wrath
 So merciful is Heav'n) this toil became

The solace of his woes, the sweet employ
 Of many a live-long hour, and surest guard
 Against disease and Death. DEATH tho' denounc'd
 Was yet a distant Ill, by feeble arm
 Of Age, his sole support, led slowly on.
 Not then, as since, the short-liv'd sons of men
 Flock'd to his realms in countless multitudes;
 Scarce in the course of twice five hundred years
 One solitary ghost went shiv'ring down
 To his unpeopled shore. In sober state,
 Through the sequester'd vale of rural life,
 The venerable PATRIARCH guileless held
 The tenor of his way; Labour prepar'd
 His simple fare, and Temp'rance rul'd his board.
 Tir'd with his daily toil, at early eve
 He sunk to sudden rest; gentle and pure
 As breath of evening Zephyr and as sweet
 Were all his slumbers; with the Sun he rose,
 Alert and vigorous as He, to run
 His destin'd course. Thus nerv'd with Giant Strength
 He stem'd the tide of time, and stood the shock
 Of ages rolling harmless o'er his head.

At life's meridian point arriv'd, he stood,
 And looking round saw all the vallies fill'd
 With nations from his loins; full-well content
 To leave his race thus scatter'd o'er the Earth,
 Along the gentle slope of life's decline
 He bent his gradual way, till full of years
 He dropt like mellow fruit into his grave.

Such in the infancy of Time was Man,
 So calm was life, so impotent was DEATH!
 O had he but preserv'd these few remains
 These shatter'd fragments of lost happiness
 Snatch'd by the hand of heav'n from the sad wreck
 Of innocence primæval; still had he liv'd
 In ruin Great; tho' fall'n, yet not forlorn;
 Though mortal, yet not every where beset
 With Death in every shape! But He, impatient
 To be compleatly wretched, hastes to fill up
 The measure of his woes.—'Twas Man himself
 Brought Death into the world, And Man himself
 Gave keenness to his darts, quicken'd his pace,
 And multiplied destruction on mankind.

First ENVY, Eldest-Born of Hell, embrued
 Her hands in blood, and taught the Sons of Men
 To make a Death which Nature never made,
 And God abhorr'd ; with violence rude to break
 The thread of life ere half its length was run,
 And rob a wretched brother of his being.
 With joy Ambition saw, and soon improv'd
 The execrable deed. 'Twas not enough
 By subtle fraud to snatch a single life,
 Puny impiety ! whole kingdoms fell
 To fate the lust of power : more horrid still,
 The foulest stain and scandal of our nature
 Became its boast. *One* Murder made a Villain,
Millions a Hero. Princes were privileg'd
 To kill, and numbers sanctified the crime.
 Ah ! why will Kings forget that they are Men ?
 And Men that they are brethren ? Why delight
 In human sacrifice ? Why burst the ties
 Of Nature, that should knit their souls together
 In one soft bond of amity and love ?
 Yet still they breathe destruction, still go on
 Inhumanly ingenious to find out

New pains for life, new terrors for the grave,
 Artificers of Death ! Still Monarchs dream
 Of universal Empire growing up
 From universal ruin. Blast the design,
 GREAT GOD OF HOSTS, nor let thy creatures fall
 Unpitied victims at Ambition's shrine !

Yet say, should Tyrants learn at last to feel,
 And the loud din of battle cease to bray ;
 Should dove-ey'd Peace o'er all the earth extend
 Her olive branch, and give the world repose,
 Would Death be foil'd ? Would health, and strength, and
 youth

Defy his power ? Has he no arts in store,
 No other shafts save those of war ? Alas !
 Ev'n in the smile of Peace, that smile which sheds
 A heav'nly sunshine o'er the soul, there basks
 That serpent Luxury. War its thousands slays,
 Peace its ten thousands. In th' embattled plain
 Tho' Death exults, and claps his raven wings,
 Yet reigns he not ev'n there so absolute,
 So merciless, as in yon frantic scenes

Of

Of midnight revel and tumultuous mirth,
 Where, in th' intoxicating draught conceal'd,
 Or couch'd beneath the glance of lawless Love,
 He snares the simple youth, who nought suspecting
 Means to be blest—But finds himself undone.

Down the smooth stream of life the Stripling darts
 Gay as the morn; bright glows the vernal sky,
 Hope swells his sails, and passion steers his course.
 Safe glides his little bark along the shore
 Where virtue takes her stand; but if too far
 He launches forth beyond discretion's mark,
 Sudden the tempest scowls, the surges roar,
 Blot his fair day, and plunge him in the deep.
 O sad but sure mischance! O happier far
 To lie like gallant Howe 'midst Indian wilds
 A breathless corse, cut off by savage hands
 In earliest prime, a generous sacrifice
 To freedom's holy cause; than so to fall
 Torn immature from life's meridian joys,
 A prey to Vice, Intemp'rance, and Disease.

Yet

Yet die ev'n thus, thus rather perish still,
 Ye Sons of Pleasure, by th' Almighty strick'n,
 Than ever dare (though oft, alas! ye dare)
 To lift against yourselves the murd'rous steel,
 To wrest from God's own hand the sword of Justice,
 And be your own avengers! Hold, rash Man,
 Though with anticipating speed thou'st rang'd
 Through every region of delight, nor left
 One joy to gild the evening of thy days;
 Though life seem one uncomfortable void,
 Guilt at thy heels, before thy face despair,
 Yet gay this scene, and light this load of woe
 Compar'd with thy hereafter. Think, O think,
 And e'er thou plunge into the vast abyss,
 Pause on the verge awhile, look down and see
 Thy future mansion. Why that start of horror?
 From thy slack hand why drops th' uplifted steel?
 Didst thou not think such vengeance must await
 The wretch, that with his crimes all fresh about him
 Rushes irreverent, unprepar'd, uncall'd,
 Into his Maker's presence, throwing back
 With insolent disdain his choicest gift?

Live

Live then, while Heav'n in pity lends thee life,
 And think it all too short to wash away
 By penitential tears and deep contrition
 The scarlet of thy crimes. So shalt thou find
 Rest to thy soul, so unappall'd shall meet
 Death when he comes, not wantonly invite
 His ling'ring stroke. Be it thy sole concern
 With innocence to live, with patience wait
 Th' appointed hour; too soon that hour will come
 Tho' Nature run her course. But Nature's God,
 If need require, by thousand various ways,
 Without thy aid, can shorten that short span,
 And quench the lamp of life. O when he comes
 Rous'd by the cry of wickedness extreme
 To Heav'n ascending from some guilty land
 Now ripe for vengeance; when he comes array'd
 In all the terrors of Almighty wrath;
 Forth from his bosom plucks his ling'ring Arm,
 And on the miscreants pours destruction down,
 Who can abide his coming? Who can bear
 His whole displeasure? In no common form
 Death then appears, but starting into Size

Enormous,

Enormous, measures with gigantic stride
Th' astonish'd Earth, and from his looks throws round
Unutterable horror and dismay.

All nature lends her aid. Each Element
Arms in his cause. Ope fly the doors of Heav'n ;
The fountains of the deep their barriers break ;
Above, below, the rival torrents pour,
And drown Creation ; or in floods of fire
Descends a livid cataract, and consumes
An impious race. Sometimes when all seems peace,
Wakes the grim whirlwind, and with rude embrace
Sweeps nations to their grave, or in the deep
Whelms the proud wooden world; full many a youth
Floats on his wat'ry bier, or lies unwept
On some sad desert shore ! At dead of night
In fullen silence stalks forth PESTILENCE :
CONTAGION close behind taints all her steps
With pois'nous dew ; no smiting Hand is seen,
No sound is heard ; but soon her secret path
Is mark'd with desolation ; heaps on heaps
Promiscuous drop : No friend, no refuge near ;

All, all, is false and treacherous around,
 All that they touch, or taste, or breathe, is DEATH.

But ah ! what means that ruinous roar ? why fail
 These tott'ring feet ? Earth to its centre feels
 The Godhead's power, and trembling at his touch
 Through all its pillars, and in ev'ry pore,
 Hurls to the ground with one convulsive heave
 Precipitating domes, and towns, and tow'rs,
 The work of ages. Crush'd beneath the weight
 Of gen'ral devastation, millions find
 One common grave ; not ev'n a widow left
 To wail her sons : the house, that should protect,
 Entombs its master ; and the faithless plain,
 If there he flies for help, with sudden yawn
 Starts from beneath him. Shield me, gracious Heav'n,
 O snatch me from destruction ! If this Globe,
 This solid Globe, which thine own hand hath made
 So firm and sure, if this my steps betray ;
 If my own mother Earth from whence I sprung
 Rise up with rage unnatural to devour

Her wretched offspring, whither shall I fly?
 Where look for succour? Where, but up to thee,
 Almighty Father? Save, O save thy suppliant
 From Horrors such as these! At thy good time
 Let Death approach; I reckon not—let him but come
 In genuine form, not with thy vengeance arm'd,
 Too much for Man to bear. O rather lend
 Thy kindly aid to mitigate his stroke;
 And at that hour when all aghast I stand,
 (A trembling Candidate for thy compassion,)
 On this World's brink, and look into the next:
 When my soul starting from the dark unknown
 Casts back a wishful look, and fondly clings
 To her frail prop; unwilling to be wrench'd
 From this fair scene, from all her custom'd joys,
 And all the lovely relatives of life;
 Then shed thy comforts o'er me, then put on
 The gentlest of thy looks. Let no dark Crimes
 In all their hideous forms then starting up
 Plant themselves round my couch in grim array,
 And stab my bleeding heart with two-edg'd torture,
 Sense of past guilt, and dread of future woe.

Far be the ghastly crew! And in their stead,
 Let chearful Memory from her purest cells
 Lead forth a goodly train of Virtues fair
 Cherish'd in earliest youth, now paying back
 With tenfold usury the pious care,
 And pouring o'er my wounds the heav'nly balm
 Of conscious innocence. But chiefly, THOU,
 Whom soft-ey'd Pity once led down from Heav'n
 To bleed for Man, to teach him how to live,
 And, oh! still harder Lesson! how to die;
 Disdain not Thou to smoothe the restless bed
 Of Sickness and of Pain. Forgive the tear
 That feeble Nature drops, calm all her fears,
 Wake all her hopes, and animate her faith,
 Till my rapt Soul anticipating Heav'n
 Bursts from the thraldom of incumb'ring clay,
 And on the wing of Extasy upborn
 Springs into Liberty, and Light, and Life.

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